

GRIEVING ALONE

A SINGLE PARENT'S EXPERIENCE

When a single parent experiences grief over the death of a child, there are several issues and dilemmas which are encountered that are different from those faced by the bereaved parent who is not alone. The author offers some suggestions which may help.

A Strong Sense of Isolation

When your child dies the world seems to tumble around you. It feels particularly frightening to a single parent, for there's no partner to reach out to help bridge the gap of isolation. We need others to help us balance our upside-down world, to encourage us to keep hanging on when it seems too unbearable.

Often the isolation becomes real after a few weeks of bereavement. Friends who have been supportive drift away, assuming someone else is checking on your well-being. Constantly taking the initiative to reach out for support is draining and tiring when you do it three times a week, every week for months, and the pain and the need don't seem to lessen.

Having a "parent contact" available by phone and who is willing to talk or listen can be a lifesaver. Just knowing someone was available, helped ease that sense of isolation.

Inconsistency

As every hour of every day seemed like a challenge to "get through," the only person I knew I could depend on was me! Needing to be strong for myself at times seemed just too much.

I longed for someone I could depend on to reassure me when I was feeling emotionally distraught. As assertive as I am, I found it impossible to ask for what I wanted most, one person to give me one night a week just to spend time with me in my home. We could buy groceries for dinner and share the cooking, eat together, talk, watch TV or read, simply sharing time and space on a consistent basis.

But that didn't happen. I found that when I wanted company, I was supposed to **do** something, go out to a restaurant, attend a concert, see a movie, because my friends felt I needed to "get out of the house." However, being sociable and entertaining when you're dealing with fresh grief is very difficult. It's hard to think of anything except of the child who died.

Those who have understanding relatives nearby can and should look to them for stability during the early months of grief. With family you can "just be." Close friends can be asked to fill this important role too.

Sharing Emotions

Research shows that 25 percent of the stress from the loss of a loved one can be relieved by simply sharing with another person your thoughts, feelings and ideas. But every time, we as singles feel the need to express what's going on inside our minds and bodies, we have to seek someone out. Sometimes we don't have the emotional strength to even dial the phone. We dread finding that all our friends are busy or not home, knowing we may end up feeling more rejected than when we began.

Yet we need assistance in resolving important issues. For example, I felt guilty for eight months after Aaron's death that I hadn't stayed with my son the first night he was admitted to the hospital. I thought he might be alive today if I had stayed that first night. I happened to share my feelings with a friend who stated that she felt it was the responsibility of the nurses and doctors. I did not look at it that way before, and it made my guilt feelings subside. Someone had helped me look at the situation from a different angle. We need others and people who will listen are not easy to find.

Sharing the Work

A single parent who has other children at home has a special burden. Not only is the parent grieving over the loss of a child, he or she must also go back to work for a living, try to maintain stability at home for the remaining children, and handle the normal everyday household problems. Additionally, that parent must devote attention to the remaining children so they won't be emotionally "marred" by this tragedy. This seems too much to ask of anyone, yet many single parents do it day after day. I am very concerned about the long term effects created by this extra stress. These single parents need special support systems. If they are able, friends might volunteer to come in or take the children out occasionally to relieve the load.

Sharing the Special Memories

No one knows the special qualities that made your child unique except you. As a single parent, you have no one who remembers that child as you do, and who can share those memories with you. If you have other children, you will be able to reminisce with them about those traits you all remember. I continue to share with others my son's unique qualities so they, and he, won't be forgotten. However, it requires so much explaining to those who didn't know him, that the joys of sharing such memories are often lost.

To keep from doing this too often, which tends to bother others, I have used writing as a way to not let him be forgotten. Putting my memories of Aaron's humor, quiet presence and other characteristics in print helps fulfill my need for continuity.

Support from the Opposite Sex

As we've all learned, getting emotional support from a non-bereaved person is difficult enough, dating and seeking emotional support adds another level of stress. Dates are supposed to be fun. Since I was in mourning, I explained that to my date from the onset so he wouldn't expect a date who bubbled with joy. I was seldom in a light mood, but I did want to see men on occasion.

At first they'd be very understanding. But after a few dates they thought I "should be over it by now" (this during my first year of bereavement), and we'd part ways. Then I would feel abandoned again, compounding my sense of loss. I needed to feel important to someone, but I decided after a few such partings that I was not ready to be emotionally involved. In facing the pain of grief, I had no energy left for building a new relationship that first year.

Making Decisions and Facing Major Events Alone

After Aaron's memorial service, I was left with all the decisions. I sorted all his possessions, each article of clothing, letters and papers. I was the one who dealt with how and where to bury the ashes. Such tasks were grueling to face alone. I wanted someone to share the responsibility.

Each time a major event such as Mother's Day, Aaron's birthday, and Christmas arrived, I had to once again thumb through my address book to find someone who would talk it over with me and help me handle those difficult times.

The Need for Touch

My personal observation is that bereaved people have a strong need for touching and hugging. The contact not only feels good but can have a healing quality.

Being single means there's no spouse nearby to provide that gentle touch on the back or that consoling hug when the pain erupts. When you're single, you need to find other sources, like friends and relatives who know how to hug you and do so. Reach out to them often as you grieve. Some of my friends were "huggers" and one friend, a therapeutic masseuse, gave me a free massage once a week for that entire first year.

If you have surviving children, hug them often too. You will all benefit from it.

Grieving at Your Own Pace

The only benefit to grieving alone is that the single parent does not have to take into account a spouse's needs and feelings. We do not have to worry about disturbing another's sleep as we cry during the night, or hold back our tears when our spouse's spirits are high.

Special Strengths

One of our assets is the strength we've gained during our struggles as single parents. We may never have discovered that inner strength if we had not been alone.

Your special strength, plus the coping skills you've gained as a single parent are valuable. You were strong enough to handle your job as a parent alone; that knowledge can give you the courage you need to survive the grieving alone. Reaching out for others' support sometimes takes the most courage of all.

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